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ABSTRACT

Incorporating an integrated curriculum around a subject matter takes creativity on the part of the teacher. Using fine art, specifically, reproduction postcards of famous paintings for a second-grade science lesson pertaining to the Hudson River, enhances aesthetic appreciation while utilizing storytelling, writing and illustration skills. Using the reproduction postcards as a visual topic helps to inspire children's creative writing while fostering skills such as sequencing, logical thinking, reasoning and characterization, along with improving grammatical skills such as punctuation, capitalization and spelling. Children proudly present their creations while enjoying and learning the curriculum. (Author/RS)

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ED 430 247

# Using Aesthetic Work to Inspire Storytelling, Writing and Illustration

Linda T. McGarvey

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Abstract

Incorporating an integrated curriculum around a subject matter takes creativity on the part of the teacher. Using fine art, specifically, reproduction postcards of famous paintings for a science lesson pertaining to the river, enhances aesthetic appreciation while utilizing storytelling, writing and illustration skills. Using the reproduction postcards as a visual topic helps to inspire children's creative writing while fostering skills such as sequencing, logical thinking, reasoning and characterization, along with improving grammatical skills such as punctuation, capitalization and spelling. Children proudly present their creations while enjoying and learning the curriculum.

## INTRODUCTION

Everyone loves a good story. Most people like to hear them, tell them, read them or write them. For children, each seems to be a natural process that takes place in the form of simple explanations of daily activities to lengthy detailed descriptions of imaginary friends, unusual creatures and far off places. With encouragement, inspiration and creativity, the art of "showing" and "telling" is theirs to explore. This process starts early in a child's life and continues throughout their education evolving into a major form of communication in adulthood. As educators, parents and caretakers of children, it is important that we motivate children to express their ideas through methods that are enjoyable while educational.

According to Szyba (1999), the goal of education, many of us believe is to help children become independent learners in society. We want children to be able to think for themselves to be able to make decision, and to act on them (p.17). Roney (1996) believes that a most fundamental goal for schools in our country is that our children grow into adults who participate actively and competently in our democracy. Children must develop sufficient social skills to be able to cooperate with people of diverse needs and values in order to make our democracy work. They must become competent decision makers and develop mentally to their fullest potential, and they must become literate (p.7).

## STORYTELLING

Dr. R. Craig Roney (1996), asks the question, "What do children learn during a storytelling experience?" He feels much learning does occur, but

because it is primarily cerebral, the learning isn't really observable. Roney states that storytelling is a viable teaching-learning tool and can be recognized only if its inherent nature is clearly understood.

Smith (1989), believes children learn from stories. If actions speak louder than words then stories speak louder than lectures. Worthwhile stories bring action to the imagination. Stories show characters making choices, solving problems and experiencing the consequences of what they do (p.3). Many children take what they need from stories when they are ready to understand.

Stories give children a way to sort out and interpret their world. Crawford (1994) and Crowell (1994), state that stories are essential to making sense of our experiences. It is through creating stories that we are able to understand and learn from our experiences and share and compare them with the stories of others. These stories become the framework for how we interpret and construct our understandings of the world. Our need for story is universal although the particular form of storytelling varies from culture to culture(p.404).

Stories provide a vehicle for children to discover a diversity of characters with various cultural backgrounds. This enables children to develop an understanding for people that are different from them. Storytelling can also cultivate feelings of empathy as well as shape a stronger sense of self. These factors are important to social emotional growth.

Roney (1996), states storytelling provides exercise for the right as well as the left hemispheres of each child's brain but does so in such a way that the two must work in concert with each other. The left or logical side provides the narrative structure or framework for the story while at the same time, the right, more creative, side generates the imaginative story content being visualized and co-created by the teller and the audience. Storytelling, then, is consistent with recent mandates to engage children in whole-brain education.

Problem solving involves higher level thinking. The notion that thinking in a hierarchical taxonomy of mental skills has received increased attention by curriculum theorists (Bloom, Englehart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956). Teachers are now being urged to design classroom activities that enable children to engage in thinking at all levels but particularly at the highest levels, because thinking at any level includes thinking at all levels beneath it. (Bloom ranks from highest to the following types of thinking: evaluative, synthetic, analytical, applicative, comprehension, and memory.) (p.8).

## PUTTING IDEAS ON PAPER

Moving from storytelling to story writing involves a more complex process. Wood (1988), relates that text is not simply speech written down nor is writing merely the substitution of visible symbols for acoustic ones. Both reading and writing involve ways of communicating that transform the nature of children's knowledge of language and lead to more analytical ways of thinking (p.162).

Engle (1995) feels that often the school style has little aesthetic merit and is completely inadequate for expressing personal, unusual, or powerful experiences. It is often lacking in the deep aesthetic range that is necessary to communicative meaningful events and ideas. An aesthetic and emotional response to children's work is also needed. Research shows children are very responsive to aesthetic characteristics when they are exposed to them and when those characteristics are noticed in their own work (p.217).

There are other important aspects that must be taken into account when writing. According to Routman (1991), the writing that goes on in the classrooms must be relevant to students if they are to become engaged in

and value the process. Practicing writing through exercises, skill sheets and isolated activities does not produce good writers and, in fact, is not real writing. Our focus must be on writing for real purposes (p.170). Engle states " although many teachers have come to appreciate the value of giving children license to express themselves in journals or open-ended writing activities, they have lost sight of the importance of offering children sources of inspiration" (p.181).

Smith (1994), relates that writing of books often begins with only global intentions of what the book as a whole will be about and of the way the subject will be treated. These global intentions, in due course, then determine lower level intentions for every chapter. Within each chapter will arise more focal intentions for every paragraph, and within each paragraph quite detailed focal intentions regarding sentences and words (p.173).

It is important to give children modes to relate their world into ideas, stories and print . Heimlich (1994), states that the world of a child is the tangible real world of the here and now. It is difficult for children to extend ideas from the real, familiar world in which they operate to the larger, abstract world beyond. Even adults envision distant parts of the world based on their own experiences and prior learning (p.1).

Engle (1995) discusses how Kenneth Koch, one of the pioneers in teaching creative writing to children, introduced the notion of giving children an opening line or set of stylistic requirements (for instance, write a poem in which every line must have the name of a color, a proper name, and a food in it). The value of this approach is that the structure frees children to play with the process of writing and directs their attention to the possibilities of form itself (p.217).

## ILLUSTRATION

Illustrating stories is also an important part of a child's expression and communication. Seefeldt (1995) relates that as children create art, they must organize their thoughts and actions into patterns and symbols. They reason, invent, create and solve problems (p.40). Just as adults relate to and enjoy beauty or pleasantry, so do children. Feeney and Movavick (1987) find that children are fascinated by beauty. They love nature, and enjoy creating, looking at and talking about art. They express their feelings and ideas through succinct and picturesque language; song sometimes boisterous and sometimes lyrical; and expressive movements, the essence of poetry, music and dance (p.8). According to Dever (1996) and Jared (1996), the teachers role is to provide many and varied experiences through primary and secondary resource and to provide ways for children to share what they have learned (p.70).

## INSPIRATION

Of course teachers realize that children must be immersed and engaged in the medium they are to learn, the difficulty is creating new and interesting ways to incorporate an integrated curriculum around a subject matter. Teachers can utilize plans that enable them to focus on aesthetic aspects of work along with the development of skills and concepts.

While doing a second grade science lesson on "The Hudson River," I discovered a book of famous paintings by artists who paint in the Hudson River school of painting, a specific style of painting landscapes. The children were very curious about the paintings, more specifically the postcards of the

paintings. As I observed the children making up and telling stories about the various scenes, I noticed how much they seemed to enjoy relating their tales to one another. This inspired me to utilize fine art, while incorporating storytelling and writing into our science project.

Prior to obtaining the pictures of the paintings for the children to view, we had read books about the river, studied various forms of sea life, drew pictures and had even gone on a field trip to visit the river. The children wrote about their experience on the class trip. They were instructed to write whatever they wanted in reflecting upon the day. Their stories told precisely what they learned and had done that day. Although the stories were interesting and informative, they did lack a sense of creativity and individuality. I realized the children were having difficulty creating ideas on which to write about. I decided to implement another writing project into the lesson. I did not want to model or instruct them as to their content, however I did feel they needed direction and inspiration.

Seeing the children excited and enthusiastic about the book of paintings, I decided to use the Hudson River school of painting postcards as a catalyst or spring board for children to record their stories and ideas. I was able to obtain these post cards for each child from the Metropolitan Museum of Art . I felt the children would be able to respond to the aesthetic[0] of the reproductions and intermingle those responses and stories into their writing. I also felt it was important for the children to discuss the composition of the postcards so that they had a clear understanding of certain aspects about them, such as season, foliage, boats, style and any questions they had. Some children asked about figures in the painting such as Indians, or animals and some were curious about the artist. The children's response to art and the river environment are integral parts of learning about science as well as art.

## DEVELOPING THE PROJECT

My objective for this writing project was to encourage the children to create and tell stories about their postcard reproductions, and then illustrate and write the stories. This assignment would enhance creative writing skills, improve story sequencing, and strengthen characterization. Wolf (1990), uses postcard reproductions because she feels they are ideal for young children because they are small and lightweight and can be used for a variety of activities such as matching, pairing, sorting and placing in chronological order (p.41). The children did enjoy having their own card.

I prompted children to use information and prior knowledge about the river that we had discussed and reviewed in our science lesson such as types of river fish and wildlife.Children were encouraged to use senses in their depictions such as smells, sounds and tastes. While writing creatively, children were encouraged to use descriptive adjectives when recognizing colors, shapes and landscapes. The Children described elements and scenes in order to sequence their story. They would also relate details of characters either already present in the composition or those they choose to envision. These characters could be used in any manner the child chose to use them in their story.

The children were each given their own postcard, yellow paper for their draft, white paper for the writing and two postcard size blank sheets to illustrate their story. They were also given a large black piece of construction paper to mount their finished product. The two white postcards could be used in any order with the reproduction postcard so that they could illustrate their story in any sequence they chose. For instance, the repro card could be

placed in the first, the second or the last illustration of the story line. The children were given ample time to simply observe and examine their cards so that they could contrive their stories. They were able to share their ideas and stories with their fellow group members.

After telling their stories to each other, the children then wrote a draft and edited their work, first with each other and then teacher assisted editing. They then wrote their stories on the white paper. Most of the children wrote their stories first and then illustrated them. A small number of children chose to illustrate them first then write. The choice was left to the students.

The results were wonderful. I found that several of the children who have difficulty writing creatively, and often ask for assistance or state that they don't know what to write about, seemed to have an idea or a point from which to start their writing without being given specific instructions on the process. Some of the children used unusually descriptive adjectives in their writing such as rolling river, golden sun, and peaceful place. The stories also seemed to have very interesting creative twists to them. For example, one of the children who had a picture of a tree in his repro card, wrote about the tree, and added a spider to his story to create a very interesting and funny story. Another child used the cabin in the picture as the place where he nursed an injured cub back to health. And, another child wrote about her meeting with different and kind people who were dressed in bright feathers called Indians.

Several of the children used vocabulary from prior science lessons in which we discussed various issues pertaining to the river. The children referred to the weather, sailing and fishing. Also referred to, were descriptions of the landscape such as cliffs, mountains and fields. Some children created characters that were not in the picture, others gave the figure in the picture a name and many included their family and friends in their story

The children seemed to enjoy illustrating their stories. It was interesting to observe the sequence in which the children placed their cards. There was no one format that was used more than another. However, the children were certain about the order in which they wanted their postcards placed. When asked why they chose a specific order, the responses seemed to indicate they were following a storyline. This was evident because most stated "because that's the way the story goes". Many illustrations appeared colorful, vivid and detailed. The stories and illustrations were then mounted.

## CONCLUSION

The children enjoyed creating their river stories. They stood proudly with their finished product in their hands as they each presented their work to their classmates. I believe using the postcards was helpful in motivating the children to write more extensively. In doing so, this gave children the opportunity to edit their work, improving on punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing and spelling. I also feel the cards were useful in enhancing creative writing. The reproduction cards were used as a visual topic and this was beneficial in assisting the children with their stories. Upon completion of the presentations of their stories to their classmates, as we were discussing the process of storytelling, writing and illustration, one of the children stated "its alot of work but I think I'll write a book someday." My response was, "that's a great idea, because everyone loves a good story."

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